

CHEAP REPOSITORY.

BLACK GILES the Poacher;

With some Account of a
Family who had rather live by their Wits than
their Work.

PART I,



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BLACK GILES, &c.

POACHING GILES lived on the borders of one of those great Moors in Somersetshire. Giles, to be sure, has been a sad fellow in his time ; and it is none of his fault if his whole family do not end either at the gallows or at Botany Bay. He lives at that Mud Cottage with the broken windows, stuffed with dirty rags, just beyond the gate which divides the upper from the lower Moor. You may know the house at a good distance by the ragged tiles on the roof, and the loose stones which are ready to drop out from the chimney ; though a short ladder, a hod of mortar, and half an hour's leisure time would have prevented all this, and made the little dwelling tight enough. But as Giles had never learnt any thing that was good, so he did not know the value of such useful sayings as, that "*a tile in time saves nine.*"

Besides this, Giles fell into that common mistake, that a beggarly looking cottage, and filthy ragged children raised most compassion, and of course drew most charity. But as cunning as he was in other things, he was out in his reckoning here.

for it is neatness, housewifery, and a decent appearance which draws the kindness of the rich and charitable, while they turn away disgusted from filth and laziness; not out of pride, but because they see that it is next to impossible to mend the condition of those who degrade themselves by dirt and sloth.

The common on which Giles's hovel stands is quite a deep marsh in a wet winter, but in summer it looks green and pretty enough. To be sure it would be rather convenient when one passes that way in a carriage, if one of the children would run out and open the gate, as it would save the post boy from getting off, which is not very safe for the people within the chaise; but instead of any *one* of these children running out as soon as they hear the wheels, which would be quite time enough, what does Giles do, but set all his ragged brats, with dirty faces, matted locks, and naked feet and legs, to lie all day upon a sand bank hard by the gate, waiting for the slender chance of what may be picked up from travellers. At the sound of a carriage, a whole covey of these little scarecrows start up, rush to the gate, and all at once thrust out their hats and aprons; and for fear this, together with the noise of their clamorous begging, should not sufficiently frighten the horses, they are very apt to let the gate slap full against you, before you are half way through, in their eager scuffle to snatch from each other the halfpence which you may have thrown out to them. I know two ladies who were one day very near being killed by these abominable tricks.

Thus five or six little idle creatures, who might be earning a trifle by knitting at home; who might

be useful to the public by working in the field, and who might assist their families by learning to get their bread twenty honest ways, are suffered to lie about all day, in the hope of a few chance halfpence, which, after all, they are by no means sure of getting. Indeed, when the neighbouring gentlefolks found out that opening the gate was the family trade, they soon left off giving any thing. And I myself, though I used to take out a penny ready to give, had there been only *one* to receive it, when I see a whole family established in so beggarly a trade, quietly put it back again into my pocket, and give nothing at all. And so few travellers pass that way, that some times, after the whole family have lost a day, their gains do not amount to two-pence.

As Giles had a far greater taste for living by his wits, than his work, he was at one time in hopes, that his children might have got a pretty penny by tumbling for the diversion of travellers, and he set about training them in that indecent practice; but unluckily, the Moors being level, the carriages travelled faster than the children tumbled. He envied those parents who lived on the London road, over the Wiltshire Downs, which being very hilly, enables the tumbler to keep pace with the traveller, till he sometimes extorts from the light and the unthinking a reward instead of a reproof. I beg leave, however, to put all gentlemen and ladies in mind that such tricks are a kind of apprenticeship to the trades of begging and thieving.

Giles, to be sure, as his children grew older, began to train them to such other employments as the idle habits they had learned at the gate very properly qualified them for. The right of Common, which some of the poor Cottagers have in that part

of the country, and which is doubtless a considerable advantage to many, was converted by Giles into the means of corrupting his whole family, for his children, as soon as they grew too big for the trade of begging at the gate, were promoted to the dignity of thieving on the Moor. Here he kept two or three asses, miserable beings, which, if they had the good fortune to escape an untimely death by starving, did not fail to meet with it by beating. Some of the biggest boys were sent out with these lean and galled animals to carry sand or coals about the neighbouring towns. Both sand and coals were often stolen before they got them to sell, or if not, they always took care to cheat in selling them. By long practice in this art, they grew so dextrous, that they could give a pretty good guess how large a coal they could crib out of every bag before the buyer would be likely to miss it.

All their odd time was taken up under the pretence of watching these asses on the Moor, or running after five or six half-starved geese: but the truth is, these boys were only watching for an opportunity to steal an odd goose of their neighbour's. They used also to pluck the quills or the down from these poor live creatures, or half milk a cow before the farmer's maid came with her pail. They all knew how to calculate to a minute what time to be down in a morning to let out their lank, hungry beasts, which they had turned over night into the farmer's field to steal a little good pasture. They contrived to get there just time enough to escape being caught in replacing the stakes they had pulled out for the cattle to get over. For Giles was a prudent, long-headed fellow, and wherever he stole food for his colts, took care never to steal stakes

from the hedges at the same time. He had sense enough to know that the gain did not make up for the danger; he knew that a loose faggot, pulled from a neighbour's pile of wood after the family were gone to bed, answered the end better, and was not half the trouble.



Among the many trades which Giles professed, he sometimes practised that of a rat catcher; but he was addicted to so many tricks that he never followed the same trade long. Whenever he was sent for to a farm-house, his custom was to kill a few of the old rats, always taking care to leave a little stock of young ones alive sufficient to keep up the breed; for, said he, "If I were to be such a fool as to clear a house or a barn at once, how would my trade be carried on?" And where any barn was overstocked, he used to borrow a few from thence just to people a neighbouring granary which had none; and he might have gone on till now, had he not unluckily been caught one evening emptying his cage of young rats under Parson Wilson's barn-door.

This worthy Minister, Mr. Wilson, used to pity the neglected children of Giles as much as he blamed the wicked parents. He one day picked up Dick,

who was far the best of Giles's bad boys. Dick was loitering about in a field behind the Parson's garden in search of a hen's nest, his mother having ordered him to bring home a few eggs that night by hook or by crook, as Giles was resolved to have some pancakes for supper, though he knew that eggs were a penny a-piece. Mr. Wilson had long been desirous of snatching some of this vagrant family from ruin, and his chief hopes were bent on Dick, as the least hackneyed in knavery. He had once given him a new pair of shoes, on his promising to go to school next Sunday; but no sooner had Rachel, the boy's mother, got the shoes into her clutches, than she pawned them for a bottle of gin, and ordered the boy to keep out of the Parson's sight, and to be sure to play his marbles on Sundays for the future at the other end of the parish, and not near the Churchyard. Mr. Wilson, however, picked up the boy once more, for it was not his way to despair of any body. Dick was just going to take to his heels as usual for fear the old story of the shoes should be brought forward; but finding he could not get off; what does he do but run into a little puddle of muddy water which lay between him and the Parson, that the sight of his naked feet might not bring on the dreaded subject. Now it happened that Mr. Wilson was planting a little field of beans, so he thought this a good opportunity to employ Dick; he told him he had got some pretty easy work for him. Dick did as he was bid; he willingly went to work, and readily began to plant his beans with dispatch and regularity, according to the directions given him.

While the boy was busily at work by himself, Giles happened to come by, having been skulking

round the back way to look over the Parson's garden wall, to see if there was any thing worth climbing over for, on the ensuing night. He spied Dick, and began to rate him for working for the stingy old Parson, for Giles had a natural antipathy to whatever belonged to the Church. "What has he promised thee a day?" said he, "little enough I dare say." "He is not to pay me by the day," said Dick, "but says he will give me so much when I have planted this peck, and so much for the next." "Oh, oh! that alters the case," said Giles. "One may, indeed, get a trifle by this sort of work. Come, give me a handful of the beans. I will teach thee how to plant when thou art paid for planting by the peck. All we have to do in that case is to dispatch the work as fast as we can, and get rid of the beans with all speed; and as to the seed coming up or not, that is no business of ours; we are paid for planting, not for growing. At the rate thou goest on thou would'st not get six-pence to-night. Come along, bury away." So saying, he took his hatful of the seed, and where Dick had been ordered to set one bean, Giles buried a dozen. So the beans were soon out. But though the peck was emptied, the ground was unplanted. But cunning Giles knew this could not be found out till the time when the beans might be expected to come up, "and then Dick," said he, "the snails and the mice may go ~~share in~~ the blame; or we can lay the fault on the rooks or the blackbirds." So saying, he sent the boy into the Parsonage to receive his pay, taking care to secure about a quarter of the peck of beans for his own use; he put both bag and beans into his own pocket to carry home, bidding Dick tell Mr.

Willson that he had planted the beans and lost the bag.

In the mean time Giles's other boys were busy in emptying the ponds and trout-streams in the neighbouring manor. They would steal away the carp and tench when they were no bigger than gudgeons; by this untimely depredation they plundered the owner of his property, without enriching themselves. But the pleasure of mischief was reward enough. These, and a hundred other little thieveries, they committed with such dexterity, that old Tim Crib, whose son was transported last assizes for sheep stealing, used to be often reproaching his boys, that Giles's sons were worth a hundred of such blockheads as he had; for scarce a night past but Giles had some little comfortable thing for supper which his boys had pilfered in the day, while *his* undutiful dogs never stole any thing worth having. Giles, in the mean time, was busy in his way, but as busy as he was in laying nets, starting coveys, and training dogs, he always took care that his depredations should not be confined merely to game.

Giles's boys had never seen the inside of a church since they were christened, and the father thought he knew his own interest better than to force them to it; for church-time was the season of their harvest. Then the hens' nests were searched, a stray duck was clapped under the smock frock, the tools which might have been left by chance in a farm-yard were picked up, and all the neighbouring pigeon-houses were thinned, so that Giles used to boast to his wife, that Sunday was to them the most profitable day in the week. Whether it was certainly the most laborious day, as she always did her washing and ironing on the Sunday morning, it

being, as she said the only leisure day she had, for on the other days she went about the country telling fortunes, and selling dreams books, and wicked songs. Neither her husband's nor her children's cloaths were ever mended, and if Sunday, her idle day, had not come about once in every week, it is likely they would never have been washed neither. You might, however, see her as you were going to church smoothing her own rags on her best red cloak, which she always used for her ironing cloth on Sundays, for her cloak when she travelled, and for her blanket at night; such a wretched manager was Rachel! among her other articles of trade one was to make and sell peppermint, and other distilled waters. These she had the cheap art of making without trouble, and without expence, for she made them without herbs and without a still. Her way was, to fill so many quart bottles with plain water, putting a spoonful of mint water in the mouth of each; these she corked down with rosin, carrying to each customer a phial of real distilled water to taste, by way of sample. This was so good that her bottles were commonly bought up without being opened; but if any suspicion arose, and she was forced to uncork a bottle, by the few drops of distilled water lying at top, she even then escaped detection, and took care to get out of reach before the bottle was opened a second time. She was too prudent ever to go twice to the same house.

There is hardly any petty mischief that is not connected with the life of a poacher. Mr. Wilton was aware of this, he was not only a pious clergyman, but an upright justice. He used to say that people who were truly conscientious, must be so

in small things as well as in great ones, or they would destroy the effect of their own precepts, and their example would not be of general use. For this reason he never would accept of a hare or a partridge from any unqualified person in his parish. He did not content himself with shuffling the thing off by asking no questions, and pretending to take it for granted in a general way that the game was fairly come at; but he used to say that by receiving the booty he connived at a crime; made himself a sharer in it, and if he gave a present to the man who brought it, he even tempted him to repeat the fault.

One day poor Jack Weston, an honest fellow in the neighbourhood, whom Mr. Wilson had kindly visited and relieved in a long sickness, from which he has but just recovered, was brought before him as he was sitting on the Justice's bench; Jack was accused of having knocked down a hare, and of all the birds in the air, who should the informer be but black Giles the poacher? Mr. Wilson was grieved at the charge, he had a great regard for Jack, but he had a still greater regard for the law. The poor fellow pleaded guilty. He did not deny the fact, but said he did not consider it a crime, he did not think game was private property, and he owned he had a strong temptation for doing what he had done, which he hoped would plead in his excuse. The Justice desired to know what this temptation was. "Sir," said the poor fellow, "you know I was given over this spring in a bad fever. I had no friend in the world but you Sir, Under God you saved my life by your charitable relief; and I trust also you may have helped to save my soul by your prayers and your good ad-

vice. I know I can never make you amends for all your goodness, but I thought it would be some comfort to my full heart if I could but once give you some little token of my gratitude. So I had trained a pair of nice turtle doves for Madam Wilson, but they were stolen from me Sir, and I do suspect black Giles stole them. Yesterday morning, Sir, and was crawling out to my work, for I am still but very weak, a fine hare ran across my path. I did not stay to consider whether it was wrong to kill a hare, but I felt it was right to shew my gratitude; so Sir, without a moment's thought I did knock down the hare which I was going to carry to your Worship, because I knew Madam was fond of hare. I am truly sorry for my fault, and will submit to whatever punishment your Worship may please to inflict."

Mr. Wilson was much moved with this honest confession, and touched with the poor fellow's gratitude. What added to the effect of the story, was the weak condition and pale sickly looks of the offender. But this worthy Justice never suffered his feelings to bias his integrity; he knew that he did not sit on that bench to indulge pity, but to administer justice. And while he was sorry for the offender he would not justify the offence. "John," said he, "I am surprised that you could for a moment forget that I never accept any gift which causes the giver to break a law. On Sunday I teach you from the pulpit the laws of God, whose minister I am. At present I fill the chair of the magistrate, to enforce and execute the laws of the land. Between those and the others there is more connexion than you are aware. I thank you, John, for your affection to me, and I admire your grati-

tude ; but I must not allow either affection or gratitude to be brought as a plea for a wrong action. It is not your business, nor mine, John, to settle whether the game laws are good or bad. Till they are repealed we must obey them. Many, I doubt not, break these laws through ignorance, and many I am certain, who would not dare to steal a goose or a turkey, make no scruple to knock down a hare or a partridge. You will hereafter think yourself happy that this your first attempt has proved unsuccessful, as I trust you are too honest a fellow ever to intend to turn poacher. With poaching much moral evil is connected ; a habit of nightly depredation ; a custom of prowling in the dark for prey, produces in time a disrelish for honest labour. He whose first offence was committed without much thought or evil intention, if he happen to succeed a few times in carrying off his booty undiscovered, grows bolder and bolder ; and when he fancies there is no shame attending it, he very soon gets to persuade himself that there is also no sin. While some people pretend a scruple about stealing a sheep, they partly live by plundering of warrens. But remember that the warrener pays a high rent, and that therefore his rabbits are as much his property as his sheep. Do not then deceive yourselves with these false distinctions. All property is sacred, and as the laws of the land are intended to fence in that property, he who brings up his children to break down any of these fences, brings them up to certain sin and ruin. He who begins with robbing orchards, rabbit warrens, and fish-ponds, will probably end with horse-stealing or highway robbery. Poaching is a regular apprenticeship to bolder crimes. He whom I may commit as a boy

to fit in the stocks for killing a partridge, may be likely to end at the gallows for killing a man.

Observe, you who now hear me, the strictness and impartiality of justice. I know Giles to be a worthless fellow, yet it is my duty to take his information; I know Jack Weston to be an honest youth, yet I must be obliged to make him pay the penalty. Giles is a bad man, but he can prove this fact; Jack is a worthy lad, but he has committed this fault, I am sorry for you, Jack; but do not let it grieve you that Giles has played worse tricks a hundred times, and yet got off, while you were detected in the very first offence, for that would be grieving because you are not so great a rogue as Giles. At this moment you think your good luck is very unequal: but all this will one day turn out in your favour. Giles is not the more a favourite of heaven because he has hitherto escaped Botany Bay or the Hulks; nor is it a mark of God's displeasure against you, John, if you were found out in your very first attempt."

Here the good Justice left off speaking, and no one could contradict the truth of what he had said. Weston humbly submitted to his sentence, but he was very poor, and knew not where to raise the money to pay his fine. His character had always been so fair, that several farmers present kindly agreed to advance a trifle each to prevent his being sent to prison, and he thankfully promised to work out the debt. The Justice himself, though he could not soften the law, yet shewed Weston so much kindness, that he was enabled, before the year was out, to get out of this difficulty. He began to think more seriously than he had ever yet

done, and grew to abhor poaching, not merely from fear but from principle.

We shall soon see whether poaching Giles always got off so successfully. Here we have seen that prosperity is no sure sign of goodness. Next month we may, perhaps, see that the "triumphing of the wicked is short; for I then promise to give the **Second Part of the Poacher**, together with the entertaining Story of the **Widow's Brown Apple Tree**. Z.

END OF THE FIRST PART.



